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A Social Change Approach to the Prevention of Sexual Violence toward Women

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Invited Paper:
A Social Change Approach to the Prevention of Sexual Violence toward Women

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Ideas presented in this paper were developed as part of the authors' work on Community Action Strategies to Stop Rape, a rape prevention project in Columbus, Ohio.

Abstract
Little research has been done on the prevention of sexual violence against women because conceptual confusion about a model for analyzing violence hinders progress. Current prevention programs, rooted in offender control and victim control strategies, do not transcend a view of assault as an individual violent crime. Prevention of sexual violence against women requires analyzing the place of violence against women in society and approaching prevention as a problem of systems change. The goal of primary prevention programs is the pursuit of social justice for women by deinstitutionalizing sexual violence and institutionalizing the principle of respect for persons. This principle can be integrated into law, public policy, and social action programs that affirm women's strength and self-control as individuals and as a cohesive class of people.

Most research on sexual violence is concerned with treatment of victims or offenders, not with prevention. The paucity of research in prevention can be explained by both the lack of a clear conceptual framework for the prevention of sexual violence and by problems in translating prevention concepts into practical strategies and programs. We shall (1) discuss the confusion surrounding the concept of prevention and how our understanding of prevention promotes or hinders the development of effective prevention programs; (2) suggest changes in the conceptualization of sexual violence; (3) present a rationale for a social change approach to prevention accompanied by strategies and tactics for use in the field.

Current public policy on prevention
Primary prevention, as developed in the fields of public health and mental health, encompasses activities that (a) identify a hazard which constitutes a risk for a particular population, then (b) reduce the risk by modifying or eliminating the hazard and by providing safeguards so that the people exposed to the hazard can cope with it successfully. Primary prevention strategies fall under two categories: (1) strengthening individual capacities and/or...
decreasing individual vulnerabilities; and (2) making environmental modifications through planned social change. A primary prevention program focuses on an entire at-risk population through a community-wide approach.\textsuperscript{1,2,3}

Strategies used to prevent sexual violence generally fall short of primary prevention. Current strategies focus on the interaction between offender and victim in each sexually violent event instead of on an analysis of the causes and the function of sexual violence in our society. Because of this focus, prevention efforts have been based on control of one party or the other—offender or victim.\textsuperscript{4,5}

Offender control

Sexual offender control techniques rely on three strategies: deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{6} Deterrence of sexual assault has been attempted through early detection and tracking or treatment of boys likely to become rapists\textsuperscript{7,8} and through attempts to increase arrests and convictions.\textsuperscript{9,10} Increased convictions which result in incarceration are intended to incapacitate rapists by isolating them from society. Rehabilitation through offender treatment programs is supposed to lower recidivism, although success rates vary.\textsuperscript{11,12,13} A combination of these last two techniques has been tried, primarily in Europe, where several countries have offered either castration\textsuperscript{14,15,16} or chemotherapy to reduce testosterone in career rapists and child molesters.\textsuperscript{17,18,19,20,21}

In an overview of research, Wolfgang commented that the weight of empirical evidence indicates that no current preventive, deterrent, or rehabilitative schemes have reduced violent crime.\textsuperscript{22} Not only is there reason for skepticism about the effectiveness of sexual offender control strategies, but also some interventions—such as early detection and labelling of potential offenders and castration—raise grave ethical issues.

While conviction rates vary within the criminal justice system, sexual assault is a crime in which conviction rates are low. Estimates place the percentage of rapists identified, arrested, and subsequently convicted at less than 20 percent.\textsuperscript{23,24,25,26,27} Such low conviction rates mean that very few offenders can be exposed to treatment programs.

Even if the mental health and criminal justice systems could be improved to provide increased conviction and effective rehabilitation, it is likely that we would identify, detain, and treat only a small proportion of the offenders or potential offenders. We would not eliminate sexual violence. We still must find ways of intervening to alter the conditions in our communities that continue to produce offenders.

With estimates of women’s risk ranging from 1 in 3 for spouse abuse\textsuperscript{28,29} to 1 in 5 for child molestation,\textsuperscript{30} to 1 in 8 for rape,\textsuperscript{31,32,33} it is reasonable to believe that learning to be sexually violent is normative for men in our society and that it will not be possible to isolate a static group of offenders. Sexual violence is rooted in the current social structure and in a culture supportive of rape.\textsuperscript{34,35,36} Individual characteristics that may predispose someone to commit sexual violence are themselves a product of the social structure which is the context for learning violence. It is also reasonable to believe that if violent behavior is learned, it can be reduced through relearning. However, it is important to recognize that programs devoted to relearning presuppose the initial learning and are, therefore, remedial—falling short of the optimal prevention solution. We need a social order in which men do not learn to be sexually violent toward women.

Victim control

Victim control, the second strategy currently in use to prevent sexual violence, is more frequently confused with primary prevention than is offender control. The techniques involve educating potential victims about a variety of safety precautions and a variety of situations to avoid—for example, those in which the probability of attack is presumed to be high. These strategies, variously referred to as “victim avoidance” or “opportunity reduction,” indicate a traditional approach to women’s victimization.

For generations, society has tried to protect women from sexual assault by controlling our activities. But this mode of protection has gone far beyond reasonable precautions and has contributed to women’s oppression. Sanctions on women’s conduct, dress, and activities have been incorporated into social and sexual norms so that women’s morality has been judged by obedience to the prescriptions.

Although avoidance advocates often claim that women are simply cautioned to stay out of dangerous situations and exercise common sense, there is a tendency to assume that the woman who does not take avoidance action has caused, or at least contributed to, her assault. This shifts the responsibility for attack from the offender to the victim. Obviously, an approach which burdens the victim with the blame for the attack should be unacceptable. Yet the approach is still widespread. The invidious effect of the belief in victim precipitation undermines women’s right to choose freedom and reinforces a sense of shame and guilt about “provocation.”

As crime rates have risen in the last decade, so have reiterations of the protective controls on women. Police in many cities sponsor programs for avoiding sexual assault in which the public is exposed to
information about “foolish” behavior on the part of victims of sexual assault and other crimes. Hitchhiking and wearing revealing clothing are the most often cited provocative measures for “inviting crime,” although recommendations that women should never be out on the streets unaccompanied after dark are still popular.

While the use of caution and security devices saves some people from immediate danger, these precautions do nothing to reduce the threat of sexual violence. Programs based on these strategies will never prevent sexual assault in the population because the moment a potential victim relaxes her vigilance, she may be attacked. Often women who have followed all the rules are attacked. The truth is that just being a woman in this society continually puts one in the at-risk category.

The worst consequence of victim control strategies is that women must restrict their lives to feel safe. Every woman is a potential victim. Restrictive advice to women, couched in avoidance parlance as “opportunity reduction,” obscures the massive control of women effected by limiting freedom and mobility. Denial of women’s freedom and mobility should be unacceptable in a society that values freedom; it should not be pursued as a basis for public policy. We must search for prevention strategies that do not force women to trade freedom for security.4,5

In the early 1970s several popular approaches began to encourage increasing the victim’s ability to deflect attack, although avoidance was still the preferred strategy. There was a proliferation of advertising for self-defense techniques, gadgets for noisemaking or temporarily stunning an attacker, and suggestions for talking one’s way out of a bad situation. The positive aspect of these approaches was that they required some action from women instead of total passivity. Basically, the tactics amounted to timid resistance before submission. Ridiculous weapons were proposed—hatpins, combs, umbrellas, high heels—but no serious and effective defense or weaponry was recommended. Passive resistance included advice to degrade and humiliate oneself in order to disgust an attacker so that he might cease the assault.37

These tactics not only fail to give women effective skills, they lack coherence as intervention strategies and fail to move beyond an individual level of intervention at the point of actual assault. They are stopgap measures, for individuals in crisis, which fail to link an attack against one victim with attacks on others. Knowledge that one can fight if attacked is also a very different kind of security from enjoying a certainty that one will not be attacked at all.

Redefining prevention

Our public policy reflects and is bound by the current prevention paradigm in the social sciences. If we are to progress, changes in the model are necessary. Current theory based on primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of prevention buries the real prevention issue in a welter of treatment, rehabilitation, and avoidance programs. The rehabilitation of known offenders to prevent a reoccurrence of their behavior, the early intervention after a rape to prevent a victim from breaking down, or the attempt to avoid successful completion of attacks either through avoidance or self-defense are all very different from eliminating rape and assault in a society—the genuine primary prevention goal.

Even the continued use of the public health concept of primary prevention may be keeping us from the essential issue, because, as currently used, it repeatedly has led into a paradigm that cannot transcend changing individuals. One can still conceive of intervention in different ways—for example, foiling an attack on an individual woman, lessening the probability of an attack against specific individuals or groups, or eliminating the threat of attack for all women. In the first two instances the focus is still on individuals. A continued focus on individuals ignores the social conditions that generate sexual violence and the fact that these conditions must be changed at a structural level. While individuals do change in the process of structural change, the emphasis must be on a systems level intervention. In order to move from an individual change paradigm to a social systems change paradigm, a conceptual leap is essential. As Rappaport points out, the step from a platform of primary prevention which is grounded in a mental health/mental illness model to social action for systems change is short but critical. Without it, one remains forever stuck trying to change individual behaviors without changing the context in which they occur.38

A social change approach to prevention of sexual violence

A search for the means to eliminate sexual violence at its roots must be preceded by a search for the social conditions that perpetuate it in the interaction between the sexes. Women in the anti-rape movement have been trying to understand those social conditions from the perspective of women as potential victims and, consequently, have analyzed the conditions that contribute to women’s vulnerability to sexual violence as a class of people.5 This has led, in turn, to an examination of the status of the victimized group—women—and an analysis of the patterns of interaction.
between women and men as members of distinct social
groups.\textsuperscript{39,40} Such an examination requires a detailed
analysis of the system of social relations as it is defined
by one’s sex-class—a system governed by rules of
organization. The development of feminist theory is the
attempt to uncover, understand, and critique the rules
of this social organization.\textsuperscript{41,42}

Any group of people who form a pool of potential
victims, and thus whose members have classic
characteristics of victims, will be preyed upon.
Historically, groups of people have been preyed upon
when they were structurally disadvantaged relative to
another group, had few independent means to protect
themselves, and when social prejudice against them
was upheld by popular thought and embedded in law
and policy. This has been true for immigrants as well
as racial, ethnic, and religious groups. It is true today
of women as a group. Despite some social changes,
can be described as:

- disadvantaged relative to men, because women
  are dependent for livelihoods and social status on
  family men, men employers, and men who frame
  and implement economic, social, political, and
  legal policy;
- isolated from other women and, as a result,
  ineffective as a political force;
- having few, if any, skills and systems to protect
  themselves as individuals or to protect other
  women; (The protection of women has been men’s
  prerogative, as has the decision about which
  women were worthy of protection.)
- popularly believed to be and socialized to be
  satisfied with their oppressed condition, the results
  of which are, on the one hand, self hatred and low
  self esteem and, on the other hand, conformity to
  the assigned social roles, since non-conformity is
  presented as a denial of what a woman naturally
  is supposed to be.

Conformity to the social rules has been women’s
alleged protection against some forms of sexual
violence. Since conformity perpetuates women’s
vulnerable position, however, it does not prevent
sexual violence. But women have begun to reject
conformity. The consequences are similar to those
experienced by other victim groups. Their vilification
intensifies as the powerholders attempt even more
forcefully to maintain the status quo and keep the old
social rules in place. Women’s struggles today are
accompanied by a massive increase in pornographic
materials and other messages throughout mass media
that portray women as enjoying sexual victimization
and that encourage men to discipline women through
sexual victimization. That women are in need of
discipline is also the message of the “new right,” and
courts and legislatures have made regressive
decisions on such issues as abortion rights, the Equal
Rights Amendment, affirmative action, and other issues
that are germane to women’s well-being.

The prevention of sexual violence requires a
fundamental change in women’s condition and
status—an organization of society that structurally
precludes preying upon women. Prevention means
constructing a new set of rules for social relations that
achieves this goal. When prevention is understood as
an effort to develop new rules and visions, the effort can
no longer be conceptualized as part of a movement to
prevent crime; it must be conceptualized as a
movement for social justice. The task of a prevention
movement is neither the control of the offender nor
the control of the victim. The task of a prevention
movement is the deinstitutionalization of sexual violence.

Prevention workers must alter their self-concepts
from either crime fighters or social service providers
to social experimenters and social activists. Social
scientists have observed that while one generation of
 technological developments replaces another at
increasing speed, our social relations tend to remain
frozen.\textsuperscript{43,44} A contribution to the “unfreezing” will entail
a fundamental reexamination of feminine and
masculine behavior in the social context that shapes
behavior. It is in this context that sexual violence seems
to be a natural and unalterable facet of human behavior
rather than an alterable phenomenon.

An alternative social structure has to be conceived
in light of the moral principles on which a just society
is to be based—the most important of which is the
principle of respect for persons. Under a principle of
respect for persons, a person is considered to be an
agent capable of appreciating and enjoying equality,
choice, decisionmaking, and action. A person,
therefore, has a special value and is not like an object
that simply has a use or market value. In a society in
which sexual violence is institutionalized, women are
not and cannot be valued as persons. Insofar as
women are valued, they are likened to objects—things
that can be desired and possessed. And generally they
are not valued much, even as objects, for sexual
violence is abusive, and people do not tend to abuse
what they value.

Many of the common beliefs that underlie the
treatment of women in our society are incompatible with
the principle of respect for persons. When they are
incompatible with the principle of respect for persons,
beliefs about women and the treatment of women
epitize the ideology of a patriarchal social system.
The actual rules governing the system are incompatible
with respect. Neither women’s equality nor women’s
autonomy are maximized in a patriarchal system.
Indeed, both equality and freedom for women are sacrificed. The rules governing patriarchal social systems maximize women’s availability to men in any capacity men wish to have them; consequently, under patriarchy women are less than persons. The failure to pass the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution is a classic example of patriarchal resistance to the recognition of women as persons.

Not all current beliefs about women contradict respect for persons. Nonetheless, such contradictions are fundamental to a set of existing beliefs that directly legitimize sexual violence against women. Examples include widespread beliefs that: (1) it is acceptable to dominate women; (2) "uppity" women should be restrained by any necessary means; (3) one should respect women only if they behave according to the rules; (4) women must say no when approached sexually, or violence is permissible; (5) women who say no, mean yes, so coercion is permissible; (6) even if a woman means no but she is "uppity," violence is permissible.

In order to base our society on respect for persons, we must replace current norms that violate the principle of respect for women as persons with norms that are compatible with it. One of the fundamental new norms that must be institutionalized was identified by the women’s movement early in the 1970s: Women ought to control their own bodies.

The norm is phrased here as an obligation—women ought to—because if one respects an autonomous person, one has an obligation to honor that person. From this, another norm follows: Women have an obligation to enforce their control of their bodies. Since under a principle of respect for persons one cannot bargain away personhood, and because one’s body is oneself—not something one merely uses—then women cannot bargain away control of their bodies. Arguments that women really want to be oppressed amount to excuses for violations of the principle of respect or the norms that follow from it.

For women, control of our bodies and exercise of our responsibility to ensure control are measures of our self-respect, our assurance, and our public statement that we are and aspire to be recognized as autonomous agents. For men, it means an obligation to respect women’s control of our bodies and to treat women as full persons.*

Social action strategies and tactics

The overall goal for social change is deinstitutionalizing sexual violence by institutionalizing the principle of respect for persons—a principle obviously incompatible with sexual violence. In light of this goal, prevention work encompasses activities that first and foremost empower women as autonomous agents. The activities can take place in two settings: the state and the community. In these settings, prevention work is a process of two kinds of political action: legal action to change codified law and policy, and social action to change social patterns and practices. In both cases, change has to be designed to institutionalize new normative expectations so that people’s interactions reflect respect for women as persons. It then becomes clear that such action is not just social or legal, but it is inevitably political—i.e., it requires mobilizing support and effecting change in the way institutions operate. The diagram below illustrates the general activities in each area of political action:

* Initial conceptual development of these norms and the social action approach that follows evolved through discussions among members of the Rape Prevention Task Force, Women Against Rape, Columbus, Ohio, 1977-1979.

Most prevention work to date, spearheaded by the feminist anti-rape movement, has been in the area of identifying oppressive laws, norms and practices. It is important to incorporate the feminist critique in all prevention programming as we design future programs including all elements in the diagram above. Our creative programs for girls and women, as well as for boys and men, must be evaluated for how well our material delineates a message of respect and responsibility. Enforcement means gaining institutional support for women protecting one another and expanding women’s ability to define their own needs for full participation in society. The following are guidelines for programs that meet the goals of social justice.41-45

Pursue social justice. Educational materials and counseling should include content that makes it clear that the goal for prevention of sexual violence is one of social justice rather than crime prevention. We will need programs that teach respect for self, respect between women, and respect between women and men.

Reject violence as normative. We must reverse the process of teaching girls and women how to integrate
the fact of sexual violence into their lives as an expectation, a natural event, at the same time that we deny that it is evidence of systemic woman-hating. We currently do this in a number of ways that are fairly subtle and well-meaning. For example, some rape victim treatment theory suggests that the appropriate method for crisis resolution is to help a woman "integrate" the rape into her life. Counselors, in effect, help women to accept rape as one of life’s hazards, and otherwise return to a "normal" life—where "normal" is an illusion that women are respected and protected. We generally have not encouraged women’s potential for keeping the blinders off, for being enraged, and for acting with other women to challenge violence against women as a "normal" expectation in their lives.46,47

Another example of current training for acceptance of violence rather than challenge of violence is teaching girls and women many kinds of safety precautions and giving warnings about dangerous places—all with the well-intentioned motive that women should be alert to danger and should take practical precautions. But these precautions are presented as the only lifelong actions women can take to deal with one of many unfortunate "natural" features of their lives. We have not been teaching a challenge to the concept that random and/or systematic violence by men is a natural accompaniment to being born a woman. We have not encouraged outrage, but personal anonymity and effacement as coping mechanisms.

Help women to be active and expressive. We must teach girls and women to be active subjects—teaching that their own wants, needs, and feelings are priorities, that they can and should express them, act upon them, and expect others to respect and defend them. We must also teach women to take care of themselves actively. Women, to date, have been taught "reclusive" rather than "active" protection—to "not do" rather than to do." For example, the only physical responsibility girls were taught in the past was the protection of their virginity—which has meaning only in a male system of valuing women as objects. Women have never been taught a positive duty to protect their lives and bodies for their own sakes.45

This is a fundamental change that may not be obvious at first. But we notice in self-defense classes the difficulty women have in grasping the concept of assuming a responsibility—a duty—to defend themselves and other women. That this would be an expectation in society is very foreign, because even self-defense has been presented in the past as something a woman might be unfortunate enough to have to use sometime, and, if she is very, very lucky, it might even work. The extent of public debate over whether women should defend themselves indicates the extent to which this is not yet normative, even under duress. We need future programs that provide women and girls with examples of what control is like and that build the case for a moral obligation to protect and defend oneself and the class of people to which one belongs—that is, other women and girls.

To that end, in the framework of developing new normative expectations for women’s behavior and control, we need programs that provide girls and women training and practice in handling all forms of violation—street harassment, job harassment, and social harassment.

We need programs that put girls in decisionmaking roles about safety in their lives. We need programs that evaluate dating from the viewpoint of new normative expectations. We also need programs that build a sense of community responsibility based on respect for persons, and that encourage discussion of women’s safety and the promotion of social change goals. These kinds of programs are appropriate for schools and for community outreach.

The obligation for women to enforce control of their bodies needs to be presented to women as taking control of the solutions to sexual violence. On a practical level, this obligation translates into active self-defense and confrontation on individual, small group, and societal levels. Women in communities can lead actions to redress violations of women’s self-respect by:

- supporting one another;
- actively intervening in community problems before dangerous situations get out of control;
- insisting on respect for all women;
- insisting that violence against women and women’s safety be priorities on public agendas;
- actively disseminating information among women regarding actions to stop violence;
- supporting women’s anger at injustice;
- creating support networks in communities;
- making it clear that women want to end harassment and the constant threat of violence and want the freedom to be anywhere without fear.

Promote men’s understanding and change. For boys and men, we need future programs that emphasize treating women as autonomous people and changing stereotypic views that dehumanize and devalue women. Boys need programs that reject the view of men as dominant, as aggressive competitors with each other, and as persons who denigrate women publicly and privately. We need clear curricula that teach girls and boys what patriarchy is, the extent to which it still exists, the ethical issues relating to the use
of violence, and how patriarchy combined with violence influences women's lives—restricting and controlling them.

As we teach, we should be careful not to substitute a communications model for a structural analysis of the problem of violence against women. Obviously, we want to train girls and women to communicate to men that women control their own bodies, that they demand respect, and that women will take the lead in defining how to restructure society to ensure those things. This should be the content of women's messages to men in order to institutionalize respect for women as persons. There is a danger, however, in reducing a systemic social problem to an individual communication problem, because the communications model assumes that if people just communicated clearly everything would be all right. In other words, rape results from a simple misunderstanding between two people who bear equal blame for not having given the right cues.

Besides being absurd and oversimplified, this leads to yet another variation of blaming the victim—the assumption that if a girl or woman cannot communicate, men's responsibility to her ceases. The obligation to respect women's control of our bodies is present even when a woman is completely inarticulate. While women work to strengthen their ability to stand up for themselves, it is unreasonable and unethical to assume that failure to do so is an abdication of control that can be used against them.

Refine therapeutic strategies for offenders. Current treatment programs for sexual offenders are focused on aversive techniques for achieving behavior change and on the teaching of social skills. To the extent that these treatment approaches do not incorporate a challenge to the present social structure, they simply reinforce current male/female social roles. Socializing sexual offenders to currently acceptable role behavior for women and men contributes little to interrupting the "normative" cycle of violence toward women. Social scientists who work with offenders should evaluate their teaching and rehabilitation in the light of promoting respect for women as autonomous persons.

Foster mutual responsibility and caretaking. On a community level, programs based on respect for persons should emphasize everyone's responsibility for one another's safety. News reports call to public attention cases where women have been assaulted while bystanders watch without taking action. People in these situations take no responsibility for aiding the victim. Some participate voyeuristically in the assault, and some wait passively for the police. Neighborhood programs give us an opportunity to re-emphasize respect and caring for other people by building accountability on a personal and neighborhood level and by helping people feel empowered to act.

Rape prevention should be focused on community work, for the success of programs depends upon women in every community changing themselves, limiting their exposure to sexual violence without limiting their independence and freedom, assuming responsibility for each other, and working together to change their immediate environment. This social action work can be augmented by legislative change that creates structured opportunities for women to change and organize. The primary setting of social action, the community, emphasizes the political nature of prevention work—political because it affects both the personal and the societal levels of the power relation between women and men.

Since the overall goal of all prevention work is social justice for women, it is useful to have some general criteria in mind when developing specific community programs. The criteria below are useful as guidelines that promote respect for women as autonomous persons and reinforce a norm of women's control. Prevention programs should:

- affirm women's control of their bodies and their responsibility to enforce this control;
- develop women's strength, mobility, independence, and freedom;
- facilitate the development of women's strength and independence both as individuals and as a cohesive class of people able to act in their own behalf.

It is useful for community organizers to employ these criteria when planning programs to prevent sexual assault and to use them as standards by which to critique other programs offered to the public.

References:


